



What is bias?

A biased source favours one side of an issue or gives a partisan view of an event. Such sources may still be of use to historians.

Types of bias

- **Intentional bias** – the source is deliberately distorted or falsified. This is achieved by lying, ignoring relevant information and using extreme language or emotive terms. The purpose may be to discredit some person or group.
- **Propaganda** is a particular kind of intentional bias, because facts are deliberately distorted to push an approved line.
- **Limited access to information** – a source may be based on partial information or produced before the full nature of a subject has become clear – before all the facts are in. Often this is because the source is produced when the writer has enough information to support a belief they already have. You may be led to an incorrect conclusion because it was the belief of the writer, a belief based on inadequate information or pre-existing beliefs.
- The particular **purpose** behind a source can result in bias. Historians often use materials as sources of information which were never intended for this purpose. They use decorations of pots to inform about social conditions; hymns to give information about settlement patterns and shifting populations. The purpose of a source may be to persuade a jury, to provide a pleasant decoration for a room, to make an audience laugh. For all of these reasons, some aspects of a topic may be omitted and others highlighted to fulfil that purpose. Historians using it for another purpose just have to be careful.
- **Beliefs or feelings** of the producer of the source often result in bias. People may sincerely hold a particular view and therefore not be even handed in what they write. This is particularly so in time of conflict, invasion and civil war. This kind of writing also often features emotional terms and exaggeration. It is particularly prevalent in 'modern' writing about the ancient world, because modern beliefs and technologies are not those of the past.

Evaluating sources

When you are evaluating sources, it is best to use the term bias, and biased, for intentional bias. For other problems, it is best to be specific. Say that Herodotus had limited access to information, because he could not read Egyptian, or that Egyptian tomb paintings depict an ideal afterlife rather than real conditions in Egypt.